

## BOOK REVIEWS

### Evolution of Raga and Tala in Indian Music

M.R. Gautam

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The author of the book under review is a well-known Hindustani vocalist as well as a scholar of music who has taught at several Indian universities. The book impresses me overall with his competence and industry as a researcher. Even so, I would like to begin this review with a discussion of certain aesthetical positions taken which are open to debate. While not all these issues are of exclusive relevance to Indian music, they need to be discussed for greater clarity in our approach to the subject.

Let us consider, first, the following statements from Chapter VI of the book, devoted to aesthetics:

- a. Art is said to create beauty. [p. 146]
- b. Fundamentally, there are certain similarities in the Indian and Western attitudes towards aesthetics. Both believe that there are two basic principles for aesthetic beauty—(i) structural perfection and (ii) emotional expression. [p. 142]

Now, unless one decides to ignore the dominant emphases of contemporary philosophical aesthetics, 'a' and 'b' cannot be accepted. Today the creation of beauty is just not regarded as the essential function of art. True, Mary Mothersill's highly respected book *Beauty Restored* (O.U.P., 1984) has done something to rescue the concept of beauty from the relative neglect into which it had fallen in modern aesthetics, but it is surely not yet the agreed or domi-

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nant view of aestheticians today that art aims, in the main, at creating beauty. Artistic practice is itself a witness to this dissidence. Neither Picasso's *Guernica* nor Goya's *Colossus* can be said to please the eye; yet both are commonly acknowledged as great works of art. On the whole, indeed, the emphasis of artists and aestheticians today is much more on artistic meaning or significance than on beauty.

As for 'b', its emphasis on emotional expression (ii) is unwarranted not only from the viewpoint of contemporary Western aesthetics, but from our own practice of Hindustani music. Many leading aestheticians of today, such as Sir Harold Osborne and John

Hospers, incline to the view that to think of emotional expression as the essential function of art is quite as dogmatic as the older tendency to look on imitation as the basic objective of art. And, to turn to *our* music, what emotion does a good solo Tabla recital express? I have never heard anyone admiring such recitals with the words: "How expressive!" Further, is not a good deal of our instrumental music praiseworthy merely because it is sweet, shapely, and sparkling, and quite without the semblance of any designable emotion?

I may add, incidentally, that the chapter I have been referring to bewilders me also because of some clear (but unacknowledged) echoes it provides of my own earlier writing, including some portions of my book *Aesthetical Essays* (Chanakya Publications), published almost eight years before the book under review. In appropriating material from this book, Prof. Gautam has committed at least one clear mistake and resorted to some quite unclear writing. See, first, the following:

Prof. Nihar Ranjan Ray says that "aestheticians of the traditional kind speak of the rhythm of both painting and music in one breath". [But] rhythm is a matter of beats which are absent in painting... [and so] rhythm in one art is distinctly different from that in the other. Therefore, it is indeed necessary to expose sweeping generalization and misleading analogies brought about by individual differences. [p. 153]

Now, the words within quotes are not attributed by Prof. Ray to traditional aestheticians; he himself speaks of rhythm and harmony in the different arts quite generally:

In art...the same laws operate...For, after all, what is art but...[musical] sound, line, colour, volume, space...words...gestures and movements...all consciously organized in accordance with the laws of rhythm...harmony, cadence and melody etc.?

[Ray: *An Approach to Indian Art*, Publications Bureau, Punjab University, Chandigarh, 1974, p. 78]

And, in one of my essays, I objected to the above on the ground that, though it may be taken to be true quite generally, such

blanket writing is hardly very enlightening, and that, on the other hand, it may even encourage us to slur over the point that whereas rhythm in music is essentially a matter of regulated beats, its parallel in painting is quite independent of such temporal measuring. I do not mind the absence of an explicit reference to *my* work, but erroneous references hurt. And what are we to make of the last sentence of the extract cited? "Sweeping generalization and misleading analogies" are brought about *not by individual differences*, but by *our failure to heed them*.

Consider, next, a part of what the author says on page 149 and 153:

a. The great French existentialist Marcel defines art as...simply [the] "creative invocation of a presence", creative because it is not simply a juxtaposition of elements but an organic fusion of elements; it is invocation, because it calls up certain transcendental ideas into its structure and it is a presence because it is a *felt influence*.

b. According to [Tolstoy] art consists simply in evocation of feeling...

c. Bouwsma... says [that] in this sense of *pressing-out*, it makes no sense to ask what a poem expresses. Similarly it is a misleading analogy when some aestheticians say that music expresses sadness in the way language expresses ideas. This is untenable because like poetry *music is sad*, it cannot *express sadness*.

Now, to turn first to extract 'a' above, the definition of art attributed to "the great French existentialist Marcel" is not really his, but *mine*; I proposed it in my essay 'Embodiment and the Quest for Key Aesthetic Concepts' which appeared first (15 years before the work under review) in *Contemporary Indian Philosophy* (Series II, ed. Margaret Chatterjee, George Allen and Unwin, London, 1974, pp. 194–214), and later in my own book *Aesthetical Essays* (op. cit., pp. 35–58). My writing on the point ran as follows:

Can any new word be chosen to cover all art as contemplated? I think it is possible: my word is presence. [Footnote: I borrow the word from Marcel.] No single word, it is true, can meet all the requirements of a key aesthetic concept, but, as I shall presently argue, 'presence' is preferable to both expression and embodiment.

Art, I believe, is the creative invocation of (what is, in principle) a presence... The word 'creative' here provides, by virtue of its opposition to what is merely made, three important truths; the emergent quality and (organic) unit (or form) of art, and the interplay of process and product in creation. 'Invocation' suggests the transcendent, almost magical quality of the work. [Footnote: Magic, we may note, is concerned with the presentive side of things.] What is more, to invoke is to call up a being or an influence that is (in some sense) 'higher'. Further, as in the case of invoking a deity or its blessings, what is invoked is not a mere thing: it is a presence, as Marcel understands it. In so far as he uses the word not only for persons, but for affections like sickness, we may take it to mean not mere objects, far or near, but what is given and is at once a felt influence. So, in speaking of art as a 'presence' we provide, as required, for the immediacy of the aesthetic object, without any suggestion of ghostliness; and also without turning the 'object' into something that is merely before us, a suggestion which infects all talk of embodiment.

(*Contemporary Indian Philosophy*, op. cit.; pp. 211–212).

Again, 'b' too is questionable. It does not present Tolstoy's complete definition of art which, in fact, runs thus:

To evoke in oneself a feeling one has experienced and having evoked it in oneself then by means of movements, lines, colors, sounds, or forms in words, so to transmit that feeling that others experience the same feeling—this is the activity of art.

[Leo Tolstoy: 'The Communication of Emotion', in *A Modern Book of Esthetics*, ed. M. Rader, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1955 edition, p. 53. Italics added.]

As for 'c', its last sentence fails to bring out the point at issue which is, in fact, a compressed argument, and which may be unravelled as follows:

Ordinarily, whatever is expressed by a specific complex of words can be quite as well conveyed by apt words from a different language. In other words, the meaning of ordinary language is separable from the particular words that serve as its vehicle. On the other hand, whatever an art work means or signifies is indivisible from what is there in that work, say, its perceptua or aesthetic surface. So art cannot be said to "express [say,] sadness in the way language expresses ideas". The word expression itself, if taken in the sense of a 'pressing-out', is not quite suitable for use in relation to art. For, when

something is pressed out, as oil from oilseeds, the residue is generally put aside as valueless, even as a letter may be thrown away after it has been read and its message understood. But this is just not the way we deal with authentic works of art. The fact, indeed, is that we often find it necessary to repair to them frequently even after we have presently lavished the most discriminating attention on them. Therefore, because of the intense oneness of what a work is and what it means or signifies, a (sad) piece of music or a (sad) poem can only be sad in the way it affects our feelings (say, like a sad face), rather than express sadness in the sense of pressing out.

All these defects, however, are mostly confined to a portion of Chapter VI which cannot really be said to be integral to the book, for the professed concern of the author is the historical evolution of *rāga* and *tāla* in our music. The flaws I have listed here do not detract from the overall value of the book. Its excellences are many, and I would list them thus:

a. The three concepts on which the work focusses—*rāga*, *tāla*, and *prabandha*—are indeed the source of the distinctive character of our music. So the book is certainly of some basic value.

b. Further, the work contains a good deal of scholarly material. Separate chapters have been devoted to important topics like Vedic music, music in the *Nātyaśāstra*, the *Bṛhaddeśi* of Matanga, and the *Sangīta Ratnākara*. This would benefit researchers in the history of Indian music. Chapter VII on *tāla* impresses me especially; it also shows up some deficiencies in my own work on the subject. The opening chapter is instructive too. It invites attention, for instance, to the interesting fact that whereas in the *Nātyaśāstra* the term *rāga* has been used "only in the literal sense of pleasing", the *Nāradīya Śikṣā* dwells on it from the more important viewpoint of technique.

c. Page 8 of the first chapter provides a table showing a fascinating correspondence

between *rāga mela* and the Persian *maquām*. The same chapter abounds in such useful information as the following:

i. In the 13th century [itself]... the word *rāga*... became the very foundation of our music. It took in all the *lakṣanas* of its predecessor *jāti* and added a few more like *anuvādi*, *vivādi*... [pp. 10-11]

ii. [Roughly in the same century] *prabandha* appears to have been replaced by *rūpakālapti*. This was the model on which *khayal* evolved. [p. 11]

This would indicate the rootedness of not only *rāga* but *khayāl* in our tradition.

d. Of the other points made in different chapters I find the following of special interest: the subtlety of our traditional musicians in distinguishing *jātis* from *jāti-gāna* (p. 48); Matanga's skilful classification of the *svara-śruti* relationship (pp. 92-93); his contribution in respect of *alankāras* (p. 102); Śāṅgadeva's comprehensive definition of *rāgālāpa* (p. 119); *kāku*, or the "flexibility of sound so as to bring out the emotion of the heart", as an "exceptional" feature of Indian music (pp. 151-152); the significance and plurality of *gamakas* (pp. 164-172); and the suggestion that the term *guru* may stand either for an abundance of long syllables or a sense of heartiness in tone production (p. 213).

e. The author's attitude to other scholars is all along balanced. Whether he agrees or disagrees with them, it is with some reason. (See, in this context, pp. 17, 20, 33, 34, 57, 101.)

f. Terms like *grāma* (p. 29) and *jāti* (pp. 36-37) are sensibly explained, though I cannot say the same of the way the author explains the meaning of *audava* in Chapter II: Dr Gautam's argument, here, runs along the following linkage of ideas:

...*audava* from *udu*, which means a star—in the sky or *ākāsh*—which is the fifth element according to Indian philosophy. So, ... *audava* has come to mean 'pertaining to five'. [pp. 17-18].

But this is circumlocutory. The word star has always been taken to mean an object or figure with pointed rays, most commonly, five. So the meaning 'pertaining to five' is

had the moment we realize that *audava* is from *udu*, meaning star.

g. Comparative references to Carnatic music add to the value of the work and make it relevant to Indian music generally.

h. Finally, with a view to precluding the suggestion that our ancient practice and theory of music merely forerun—instead of serving as the source of—our music today, the author is all along careful to mark and explain the similarities or emerging differences between the two. See, here, what he says about the following: the opening *hum* of our ancient musicians and the basal *sā* in *ākāra* of today (p. 25); *hrasva*, *dīrgha* and *plūta* (of *Sāmagāna*) and our own practice of *tāla*; and *vīśleṣāṇa* of *Sāma* and *layabāata* of Dhruvapada.

Unfortunately, the book is neither edited with care nor well produced. It is replete with errors of grammar, usage, spelling and punctuation. Had the copy-editor been a little more careful, the writing would have gained in articulateness and accuracy.

On the whole, however, I regard Prof. Gautam's book as a product of painstaking study and research. It is with the hope that the book will be freer of blemishes in a later edition that I have pointed out some of them at length.

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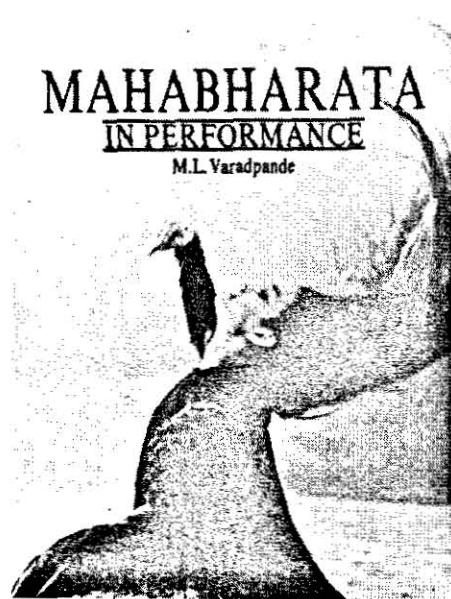
## Mahabharata in Performance

M.L. Varadpande

Clarion Books, Delhi, 1990  
136 pages (12 pages colour pictures,  
28 pages black-and-white pictures)

Rs 345

This is an impressive book in size, illustration, and descriptive analysis. It has the advantage of not attempting one more interpretation of the *Mahabharata*, and of devoting itself instead to its dramatic per-



formance on stage and screen, chiefly the former. Its ten chapters are sensibly chosen and clearly written, though without the merit of style, and they provide information for thousands who know the epic but do not know its history or its achievement in dramatic transformation. We have all of us generally supposed that the *Mahabharata* is an epic, but Maurice Winternitz, whom Varadpande quotes more than once, is surely right when he says:

In reality one can speak of the *Mahabharata* as an epic and a poem only in a very restricted sense. Indeed, in a certain sense, the *Mahabharata* is not at all a poetic product, but rather an entire literature.

This is both a tribute and a truth. Carriere, Peter Brook's scholarly associate, says approximately the same thing:

The title can be understood as 'The Great History of the Bharatas'. But in an extended meaning, Bharata means Hindu, and even more generally, man. So it can also be interpreted as 'The Great History of Mankind'.

By implication and in fact, the *Mahabharata* is both a compendium of racial memor-

ies that would please Jung, and a story of universal application. In his excellent simplification of the *Mahabharata*, C. Rajagopalachari shows that the epic is both individual and universal. The leading characters, though over life-size, are immediately identifiable, but take on the semblance of a third dimension that saves them from being grand stereotypes. Duryodhana, Krishna, and Draupadi in their separate ways exemplify this added dimension.

We do not normally expect an epic to lend itself to easy dramatization, but the *Mahabharata* has such strong dramatic and theatrical possibilities that they were bound to be explored and utilized. Varadpande painstakingly records many of these attempts, stressing the particular themes that have commended themselves to different parts of India for dramatization: Kerala (Kudiyattam), Karnataka (Yakshagana), and Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh (with song and dance). Maharashtra, not unexpectedly, used the epic's militant action to protest against imperial British arrogance early in the 20th century. But the transformation of such an epic as this, with its multitude of themes and anecdotes (sometimes a diversion from the essential theme), into a performing art argues the need for selection, and this has been admirably done more than once, but perhaps most interestingly in the Peter Brook production designed for contemporary consumption. Carriere saw that to transform an immense epic poem into a play or three plays he had to "draw new scenes from the imagination, bring together characters who never met in the poem itself. Each of these characters has a total commitment, each probes in depth the nature of his action, each considers his *dharma*, and each confronts his idea of fate." In the nine years, 1975 to 1984, in which Brook-Carriere spent studying, writing, directing their version of the *Mahabharata*, Brook was impressed more by the "ordinary accessible image" he saw in a Kerala demonstration than by the "impenetrable image" of the costumed, made-

up dancer. Finally, the two men chose to develop their *Mahabharata* on three themes: The Game of Dice, The Exile in the Forest, and The War. Even so attenuated, the stage performance took nine hours, the film version five and a half hours. But in both, the adverse critics notwithstanding, the dramatic performance is of high excellence.

Varadpande rightly takes us back to the story of how the epic originated and pays his tribute to Vyasa. He tells us how Vyasa was the son of a fisherwoman, Satyavati, of great beauty, and the sage Parashara, who crossed the Yamuna rowed by Satyavati and was attracted by her beauty. Out of their union was born Krishna Dwaipayana Vyasa, and his names are explained. We are also told that Vyasa becomes a part of the epic because his mother becomes queen of the Kurus.

It does not surprise us that the great battle—its provocation, process and consequences—should form the backbone of most performances. Unlike the epic, drama is concerned primarily with action, and action implies conflict. Varadpande takes the reader through the early performances and comments on Greek references to the epic. Presently, as he aptly shows, drama emerges from the epic. There is now no omitting Bhasa to whom the author devotes a chapter of great interest.

The Suta of the early performances is transformed into the Sutradhar of Sanskrit drama, the string-holder or controller of the programme. Bhasa's innovations, striking at any time, have the virtue of compelling continuity for, as late as our own times, Brook-Carriere open with the story-teller Vyasa, a boy as his audience, and elephant-headed Ganesha as his scribe. These three characters form a chorus—that holds, releases, and turns the thread of the story at will:

They weave episodes into a neat pattern and sequence; provide necessary context to what is happening on the stage, comment upon them and even at times participate

in the play itself... "Yes," Vyasa is made to say to the boy, "it's the story of your race, how your ancestors were born, how they grew up, how a vast war arose. It's the poetical history of mankind. If you listen carefully, at the end you'll be someone else. For it's as pure as glass, yet nothing is omitted. It washes away faults, it sharpens the brain and it gives long life."

Varadpande pays his tribute to other performances of the *Mahabharata* in India at various times. Among the most fascinating inter-sagas of the dramatized epic is the Krishna story that goes back to Vedic times but is told elaborately for the first time in the *Mahabharata*. The form used is the Keertan, a one-man performance extremely dramatic in its impact. Various theatrical techniques such as singing, dancing, and mono-acting are employed effectively in different measures to enliven the presentation. There is a chorus of musicians in attendance.

It is of the essence of such an epic as the *Mahabharata* that it shall cater in its enormous canvas for all sorts and conditions of people. The folk representations that still flourish with characteristic animation in various far-flung parts of India are well described in Varadpande's book and the illustrations do what is necessary to fix their location in the reader's memory. The author refers in script and illustration to the Indo-Soviet production involving Anamika Haksar, and he spends some time deservedly on E. Alkazi's production of Dharamvir Bharati's *Andha Yug* staged in Delhi against the ruins of Ferozeshah Kotla:

He [Alkazi] created a multi-level stage and utilized folk and traditional dramatic techniques while producing the play on it. The ruins became an integral part of the performance.

Ashwatthama is the central character of Bharati's play—it is the story of his vengeance in which all except the Pandavas and Krishna are annihilated. Bharati creates his own situations and characters but does not violate the basic facts of the original Vyasa story. The Brook "experiment", as Varadpande calls it, had an international

star cast of 19 countries, with Draupadi (Mallika Sarabhai) from India. This evoked mixed responses for and against the presentation. Linguistically, it probably left something to be desired, but Michael Billington defended the casting because it "shows the actors retaining their nationalities while sharing their skills".

Varadpande's book ought to be treated as a reference volume that school and college libraries should buy. Its virtue is primarily

one of exposition—it does not attempt to be partisan or to take a strong stand on matters of theatrical conception or production. It is unfailingly clear, and will assist future directors with background. This is all to the good, since what it demonstrates is that no performance of the *Mahabharata* should be undertaken without a period of preparatory intensive reading and mastery of its dramatic possibilities.

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